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Variations in Transnational Tutoring in Distance Learning: the Form@sup Experience

Airina Volungeviciene

Distance Education Centre at Kaunas University of Technology (KTU), LITHUANIA

Airina.Volungeviciene@ktu.lt

Laurent Leduc

Institut de Formation et de Recherche en Enseignement Supérieur, Université de Liège, BELGIQUE

Laurent.Leduc@ulg.ac.be

Compte rendu d'expérience

Abstract

This paper describes several roles of transnational tutors from the standpoint of two of them, holding different positions in the design of a curriculum based on Distance Learning (Form@sup in its English version). These roles and positions will be presented according to two theoretical models. Particular focus will be placed on the relationship between the Central unit and a transnational tutor representing it locally.

Résumé

Cet article décrit plusieurs rôles tenus par des tuteurs transnationaux à travers les points de vue de deux d'entre eux occupant des positions différentes dans un dispositif de formation recourant à l'Enseignement à Distance : Form@sup (dans sa version anglaise). Les rôles et les positions sont présentés à travers deux modèles théoriques. On insistera sur les relations entre l'Unité centrale et une tutrice transnationale le représentant localement.

1. Issues

By its nature, Distance Learning has the capacity to ignore administrative and national borders and distance. For this reason, it could be called "Distance-Free Learning"; it offers the possibility for learners and teachers to engage in a common process while they are distant from each other and would not have had the opportunity to meet in another mode. This should be kept in mind particularly when Distance courses and traditional courses are compared in terms of dropout rates. The fair comparison sometimes should be from "No available Distance courses system" and "Distance courses available situation", the availability of the course being 0% in the first situation.

The possibility to meet physically at least once in face to face sessions (F2F) is likely to decrease the drop-out rate, since students enrolled in blended courses report they enjoyed the F2F moments of their (physical) co-presence with their tutors and their peers, as well as other students. The benefits of interactions with other learners engaged in the same curriculum leads organizers to create "virtual classes", whereas the technology permits to enrol each participant anytime and have him / her follow the curriculum at his / her own pace. The present paper will focus on the role of tutors and will illustrate some modes of blended transnational tutoring, i.e. of tutoring both at a distance and in F2F mode, either by different tutors for the same learner or by the same tutor. The Central Delivery Unit will often be mentioned as the place where the courses are developed and from where they are administered: Milton Keynes for the UK Open University (OU), Heerlen for the NL OU, Liège (LabSET) for the Form@sup curriculum (Poumay, 2005a).

2. Seven Modes of Tutoring

In order to clarify the concept of tutoring, let us consider the following seven modes of tutoring,

i.e. situations of participants' access to their Tutor(s):

1. Presential mode only in the Central Delivery Unit, i.e. Face to Face (F2F) mode only by participants coming to the Central unit. It is the way traditional teaching takes place.
2. Distance mode only from the Central Unit. It is the way traditional Distance Learning (DL) tutoring works.
3. Distance mode only with a tutor himself distant from the Central Unit. For instance Prof. Leclercq acted as a tutor from Liege for (his) course delivered by CNED (in Poitiers) to students located in Lebanon, Madagascar and Vietnam. No F2F occurred.
4. Blended mode with learner coming to the Central Unit once or twice a year (typically during summer school sessions), the rest of the year being at a distance. It is the traditional meaning of "blended mode" in e-learning.
5. Blended mode with mainly presential students who enrol in parts of (partial) distant education curriculum delivered by another Central Unit.
6. Blended mode with the Central Unit - a fellow local tutor (F2F), with or without a (distant) tutor from the Central Unit.
7. Blended mode with a distant tutor from the Central Unit, going once or twice a year to the learner's country for a F2F mode (visiting tutor).

Although infrequent, the two last modes of tutoring were used in the Form@sup curriculum. This paper will illustrate them.

3. Tutoring in the Form@sup Curriculum

"Year 1" of the Form@sup curriculum started in mid-September, 2002, and ended in mid-September, 2003. In Form@sup, the participants

(we prefer this term to “students” since they are either university professors or assistants) have access to personal or group tutors. In Year 1, these “national” or “local” tutors interacted only in French with the students, in mode 4 of tutoring (Blended).

In Year 2 (2003-2004), an English version of the curriculum was launched thanks to the EMDEL project¹ that permitted to translate and adapt contents (Poumay, 2005a). Some Central Unit tutors functioned in an international mode, i.e. in mode 1, Distance tutoring only. For instance, Laurent L. functioned as a Central Unit distant tutor from LabSET at the University of Liège for some of the 6 Lithuanian participants, interacting with them in English. In Year 3 (2004-2005), the modes 6 and 7 (blended tutoring) were implemented.

Mode 6 of tutoring could function since Airina V., one of the 6 Lithuanian participants in year 2 Form@sup (2003-2004), after having obtained the Form@sup diploma, served as a local (Lithuanian) tutor for the six new Lithuanian participants in Year 3 Form@sup (2004-2005). She became a fellow of the Central Unit (LabSET), this concept being more defined and illustrated further in this article. This results from the fact that the Form@sup French and English programs differ from each other. In French, it begins with one week (in October) of F2F training at LabSET, Ulg. In the English program, in year 2 (2003-2004), participants (in Lithuania) had the possibility to discover the organizational aspects only online, via the virtual learning environment, as well as via video conferencing. Therefore, the *necessity to have a resource person or a local tutor* in Lithuania was identified.

Mode 7 of tutoring was possible because Laurent L., a Central Unit researcher and (transnational) tutor during Year 2 Form@sup (2003-2004) travelled twice to Kaunas University in Lithuania during Year 3 and, therefore, was able to add a presential mode to his distant tutoring.²

4. The English Form@sup Coordinator's Tutor Roles

Zane Berge (1995) distinguishes four categories of roles for a “tutor” aimed to facilitate the distant learning process of a group of students:

- **Pedagogical** roles, intellectual and linked to the task itself;
- **Social** roles, enabling to create a friendly social environment easing learning;
- **Managerial** roles, including the administrative, procedural and organisational tasks;
- **Technical** roles, making the participants comfortable and confident with the system.

In the framework of Form@sup, those four roles are held by the staff members involved in the teaching process at various levels: the academic head (e.g. D. Leclercq), the transnational coordinator of the English version of Form@sup during the academic year 2004-2005 (eg L. Leduc) and the other tutors, including the native transnational tutor (e.g. A. Volungeviciene). Tutors may be in charge of participants (personal tutors or supervisors), of specific contents (thematic or referent tutors) or of specific activities (animation leader). The personal supervisor coordinates technical and graphic production aspects; ensures that work progresses and that it adheres to the set schedule, giving reminders about deadlines and ensuring that the schedule is adhered to, ensuring realistic time management, informing the course coordination authorities if frequent delays and shortcomings are detected.

The coordinator of English Form@sup based in the Liège Central Unit (LabSET) holds concurrently several of those functions: personal supervisor for five projects, animation leader for one virtual seminar out of four, and referent tutor for one of the four generic themes explored in 2004-2005.

The majority of the interventions directed to the participants are conducted through emails or forum messages, even if telephone, videoconference and F2F sessions are used on several occasions during the Form@sup academic year. Written format input and responses are preferred to oral ones for regular communication with students, since they do not require synchronous work and they assure recordings of exchanges.

Looking back at some significant messages sent to the participants during the 2004-2005 academic year (including answers to questions, solutions to problems, and introduction of new useful elements), we were able to identify which of Berge's roles the tutors assumed.

The (Belgian) coordinator of English Form@sup holds concurrently several tutor functions. It often happens that, by writing a mail to someone, he opens his message very officially as a coordinator, and carries on as a supervisor using a more informal tone. A similar remark can be made regarding assimilation to Berge's roles since; a single message can include for example, managerial, pedagogical and social dimensions at the same time.

4.1 The Tutor's Technical Role

In order to make the participant technically comfortable with the system, Berge (1995) recommends to "have technical support people available to answer emailed or telephoned inquiries".

The international dimension of Form@sup requires that specific technical difficulties are solved, notably deriving from the need of substitute solutions for face-to-face sessions, especially when three countries are involved. During the previous academic year, a participant had to defend her theme work orally from the United States in front of an audience (including her peers and jury members) spread over two other countries. Her problem came from the fact

that she did not have access to a videoconference room and system, but only to MSN and a simple webcam. Fortunately, thanks to an efficient communication between the KTU and LabSET technicians, a brand new technology equivalent to a three points MSN connection, was experimented and used successfully.

Berge (1995, p. 28) recommends to "provide swift feedbacks, especially to technical problems", and to "develop a study guide" which "could serve as the basis for discussion, provide introductory information, description of course activities, resources materials, and other information about the course components or procedures". Obviously, if the first advice takes its place downstream from the student problem, the second one refers more to the upstream side of the difficulties. Such guide has been actually developed in Form@sup.

4.2 The Tutor's Managerial Role

Each type of the tutor involved in the Form@sup teaching process can carry out managerial tasks which Berge (1995)'s recommends to "maintain as much flexibility as can" such as Deadlines, Equity, Equivalating, Compensating accidents, Announcing bad news, Assuring objectivity of assessment procedure, etc.

4.3 The Tutor's Pedagogical Role

During the Exchange Seminars, the participants present orally the state of progress of their Personal Project and of their Research Question. This presentation, made via videoconferencing between KTU and the Central Unit (LabSET) is supported by PPT documents thanks to Kaunas University of Technology's VIPS system. The electronic version of this PowerPoint presentation is sent in advance, so that the attendants have the paper copy of the PowerPoint presentation in their hands. The attendants (the academic head and the tutors) respond to the presenter by providing directly (orally) formative feedback, various pieces of advice or reflection trails. As the needs arise, the

same can also intervene through the forum, for example consecutively to difficult or specific questions.

This exchange was prepared in connection with the personal tutor or supervisor, who has seen successive drafts of the PowerPoint presentation and who reacted (during a chat session or by e-mail) to improve its quality. Supervisors do not deliver grades. This situation can be compared to the one established in Maastricht, at the Faculty of medicine where each staff member is either in the tutoring group or in the evaluating one, for one year (Leclercq & Vandervleuten, 1998, p. 187-205).

The supervisor's role is to:

1. Accompany (to be a "wise on the side") the different phases in the elaboration of an online course, i.e. Needs and Existing situation analysis, Design, Implementation, Trials, Evaluation and Adjustments, by
 - ensuring that the student is performing the activities, verifying that s/he understands their purpose and that s/he has successfully transferred learning points into practice;
 - using the online tools: grids, models, etc;
 - providing "quality control" for the product and giving advice in this area;
2. Moderate a newsgroup on a set day every week;
3. Lead bi-monthly educational chat sessions (implying clear social skills, as well);
4. Encourage educational reflection and the link between personal projects and theoretical models encountered;
5. Be available for students before they present their projects and compile their reports (to provide any advice needed).

Unsurprisingly, the supervisors use the traditional learning actions known as effective.

According to Bloom (1976)'s experimental results, these actions are

- Presentation of indices (stimuli, documents, etc.),
- Reinforcement (feedback, praise),
- Participation (asking to each participant, individually to produce something or to input into a collective endeavor),
- Retroaction – Correction.

According to Leclercq & Poumay (2005), the appropriate combination of their 8 Events of Learning is favorable achievement. The following examples illustrate pedagogical strategies inspired by this model.

- Suggesting steps to be followed (guiding).
- Showing an example (modeling).
- Explaining links between theory and actual cases (transmitting).
- Inviting the participant to search or to experiment.
- Substituting a little for the participant and initiating the conception process instead of him/her (prompting).
- Inviting the participants to comment each others' productions (debate).

In this context, signs of encouragement must be delivered when the participant shows some evidence of willingness (social part), especially when a student shows definite progress in their course development and personal reflection.

Nevertheless, the personal adviser must endorse other pedagogical issues such as

- honesty and objectivity if the quality of the student's work still remains very low.
- demanding criteria in terms of professionalism. For instance, a participant can feign to have "missed" several reminder messages, and when

repeated, this attitude can take the turn of disrespectfulness towards the supervisor who must remain firm.

4.4 The Tutor's Social Role

Many persons can be lead (at different levels) to moderate a thematic forum, to bring life to a chat session, and more generally to manage a group, paying attention to facilitate interactivity and mutual aid between peers, or to create a friendly teaching environment.

One of the challenges for the tutors in Form@sup during last academic year was to promote peer cooperative learning and the emergence of a learners' community by encouraging the students to use the forum instead of personal email boxes.

When several participants are working on the same theme, they must demonstrate solidarity and a real consistency between their individual contributions to the final production. Tact and social skills are needed by the tutor, who must always pay attention that student behavior is appropriate. The social dimension of the process is very much related to communication, and is notably a matter of vigilance regarding the tone employed from both sides. Berge (1995) suggests for instance to the tutor to "praise and model the discussant behavior (he/she) seeks... (to) watch the use of humor and sarcasm...(to) not ignore bad discussant behavior". In this respect, Bales (1950)'s categories of social nature of interactions in chats and forums is valuable since he suggests six bipolar dimensions such as

Asks to be orientated, informed	Communication	Orients, informs
Ask for other's opinions, expressions of their feelings	Evaluation	Communicates his opinions, feelings, attitudes
Ask to be told what to do or how to do it	Control	Suggests what to do or how to do things
Does not agree, rejects passively, does not help	Decision	Agrees, accepts passively, participates, conforms oneself
Is tense, escapes, withdraws from group	Tension reduction	Lowers the tensions, jokes, smiles, shows his satisfaction
Lowers others' status, aims essentially to promote himself	Reintegration	Solidarises, increases others' status, helps, rewards

Participants in such a demanding program often have to deal with a feeling of discouragement (sometimes linked to the multiplicity of deadlines

or general amount of work and tasks to be combined with their own professional activities). Consequently, any signs of support and positive reinforcement are welcomed, using any kind of media.

Videoconference does not offer the same degree of subjective proximity and informality (maybe complicity) like a F2F meeting can successfully bring.

Many elements – like socio-cultural differences or difficulties related to the use of English as work language – can interfere and even disrupt good communication. Mistakes ("quiproquos" in French) can result from language unfamiliarity.

Need for cultural adjustment. The simple change of communication tool can infer any misunderstanding. For example, a participant drew panicky conclusions from the simple fact that her supervisor tried to contact her by phone about one of her task.

When it is possible, having a native expert available on site is very advantageous and this is what English Form@sup provides for Lithuania.

5. Mode 6 or Central Unit-Fellow Acting as a Local Native Tutor (Airina V.)

The transnational tutor based in Lithuania is a former participant of the degree. She is able to (and actually does) endorse this "multi-caps condition" at an even higher transversal level, since she can bring her support to the participants at any moment, and because she has already lived and achieved every Form@sup activity or difficulty.

Her function is nevertheless a little more informal than that of the coordinators, so that the solution of a student problem often emerges from a common action. That useful collaboration begins with good

communication since the local transnational tutor's role consists of anticipating and identifying any difficulty met by a participant and forwarding and/or "translating" it to the Central Unit staff.

The Central Unit-fellow acting as a local tutor lives close to the learners, so that F2F meetings are easy, but s/he participates in many of the central unit's (here LabSET) reflections and activities, in a special mode, as will be shown hereafter.

5.1 Collaboration Agreement

It was agreed between the two universities, Liege University (ULg) and Kaunas University of Technology (KTU), that Airina V. would play this role in the Form@sup curriculum for Lithuanian students when a minimal number of students from this country enrol in the Form@sup degree. This remains a part of her function at her university, deeply committed to promoting distance education and e-learning in Lithuania.

A mutual agreement was made, where the international tutor undertakes responsibilities to ensure the dissemination of Form@sup training in Lithuania, to facilitate new participants with their dossier preparation and transferring them to LabSET, to organize and facilitate information exchange and video conferences implemented during the whole academic year, to select and initiate the translation of the Curriculum into Lithuanian, to ensure technological training at Kaunas University of Technology for the new Lithuanian participants, as well as to discuss, motivate and provide feedback and support for learners. For this purpose, the visit and training on training the participants is necessary and mandatory for the international tutor to be able to perform these functions properly.

5.2 Apprenticeship Periods in the ULg-LabSET Central Unit

Airina V. was invited by ULg to participate actively in the two "F2F weeks" in French of Year

3 Form@sup, organised by LabSET at the University of Liege, in October 2004, and in March 2005. Specifically, Airina V. spent two weeks each time, i.e. with additional days to prepare and debrief the presential week with the Central Unit. This additional time in Liège was used also to prepare with the Central Unit the English version of Year 3 Form@sup, delivered for seven Lithuanian staff members, six in Lithuania (from three different Higher education Institutions³) and one in Chicago⁴.

These apprenticeship periods were beneficial in many respects since the collaboration between the University of Liege and Kaunas University of Technology in the delivery of the Post-Graduated study program *Pédagogique Universitaire* (Higher education) had a very important impact on the development of Distance Education not only at the Distance Education Centre at Kaunas University of Technology, but also among the teachers from other Lithuanian Universities (Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas University of Medicine, Kaunas Vocational Training School, and other education institutions). New participants from other institutions joined Form@sup programme for the Year 3 Form@sup (2004-2005). The same happened in Year 4.

5.3 Other Meetings Between the Local Transnational Tutor and the Central Unit Team

One of such meetings took place in the 3rd Research EDEN Workshop in Oldenburg in March, 2004, where Airina V. and six members of LabSET met. This constituted an additional opportunity for making presentations on their activities, for sharing and discussing methods and experiences.

Another opportunity to meet was provided by the common participation in the international Leonardo da Vinci project E.M.D.E.L. (<http://www.emdel.org>). This project brought together the two institutions and initiated their mutual activities.

The dissemination of other projects undertaken by the KTU Distance Education Centre (DEC) offered other exchange possibilities. For example, "IT-Academy, <http://www.smelearning.net>) in Leonardo da Vinci Awards Exhibition called "32 success stories".

5.4 The Local Transnational Tutor as the Orchestra Conductor at Home

Important occasions to collaborate was the two 4-days visits in Kaunas of three members of the LabSET team: one in October, 2004, and the other in October, 2005. Not only did it permit to apply the mode seventh of tutoring (see hereafter), but also it gave the local transnational tutor (Airina V.) a central role.

The most salient of her roles has been the animation of a half-day videoconference using ViPS⁵ (<http://distance.ktu.lt/vips>) where several audio-visual live presentations were broadcasted in real time from KTU DEC (with about 50 presential participants and attended at a distance simultaneously in Liège, in five towns in Lithuania and in Chicago).

Figure 1. Three-point video conference with Chicago (USA), Kaunas (LT) and Liege (BE)



Conclusion

Among all the definitions of Distance Learning, LabSET appreciates especially the one provided by the TÉLUQ (i.e. the Distance Learning Center for the Province of Quebec, Canada): "A network of people and resources aimed at favouring learning at a distance."

The fact that "people" is first cited, though one would expect words like "engines, computers or wires", is indicative of the LabSET's position: distance learning is a human process enhanced by human beings. The social nature of learning, as advocated by Vygotsky (1931/1985), is illustrated by the importance the LabSET places on making local, national, international and native international tutors available to learners.

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Notes

¹ European Model for the Development of E-Learning

² The same could be replicated in year 4, with another Central Unit tutor (Lydwine Lafontaine) going one week to Kaunas.

³ Kaunas University of Technology (KTU), Vytautas Magnus University and Kaunas Vocational Training School.

⁴ Roosevelt University

⁵ The system allows transmitting the video presentation as well as slides, and recording the presentation for later review.